

An Introduction To Historic Bexhill



including
A Visitors Guide to St. Peter's Church

BEXHILL MUSEUM

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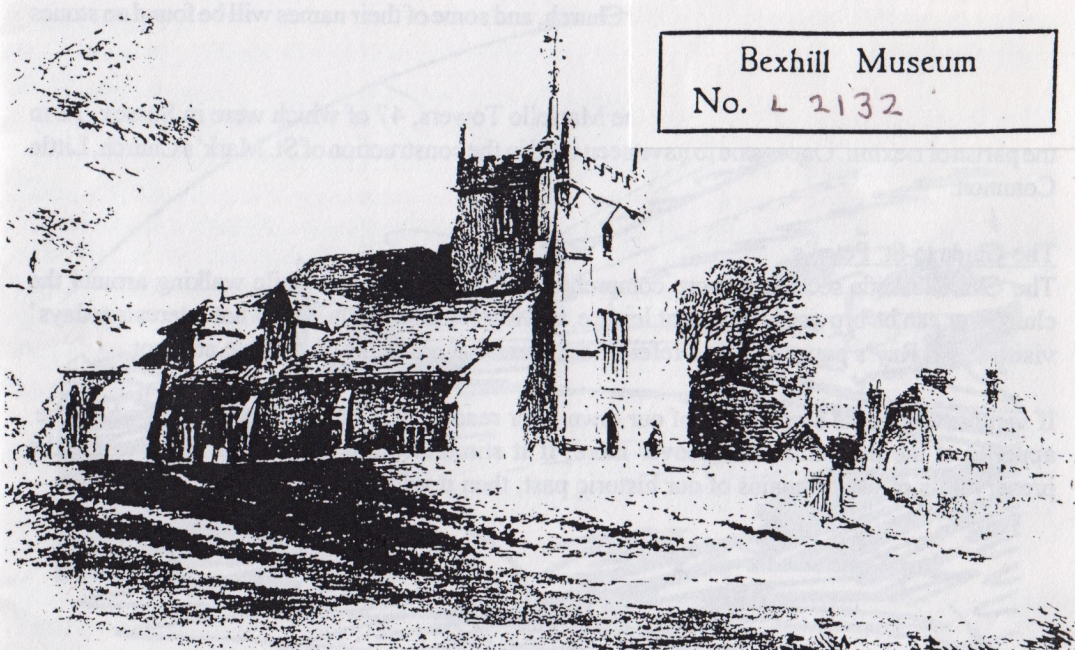
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Bexhill Museum
No. L 2132



St. Peter's Church: possibly in the 1860's

P R E F A C E

Much in this brief "Introduction" will not be found in larger works, particularly references to Bexhill's role during the Napoleonic troubles of the 18th/19th c. It is not a history of Bexhill's development, nor of people associated with that who, while locally eminent, have not influenced international events in quite the same way as most of the names found in this "Introduction".

There are exceptions. Who has not heard of Delaware, U.S.A., traditionally named after Lord De la Warr who sailed into the bay in 1610 "in the interest of England" and King James 1st. Descendants have left their mark on Bexhill over the centuries. The 7th and 8th Earls, e.g., developed the sea wall and esplanade. The 8th earl inspired the first motor races in England, along the esplanade, years before the famous Brooklands circuit.

Other contributors to Bexhill's local history include Samuel Scrivens, in 1873 the largest landowner in the town after the De la Warrs. There is Col. Lane, a veteran of the Indian mutiny whose memorial is in Town Hall Square. Among others are Moorman, Russell, Boswell, Day, Nye, Malet, Cranston, Dr. Wallis, Dr. Pie, and "Squire" Brook. Bexhill's public library or the museum can point you in the right direction for their part in local development. Memorial wall plaques to some of them are in St. Peter's Church, and some of their names will be found on stones in the churchyard.

Many books have been written about the Martello Towers, 47 of which were in Sussex, 12 in the parish of Bexhill. One is said to have been used in the construction of St. Mark's Church, Little Common.

The Guide to St. Peter's

The Church Guide section is more comprehensive. It can be used while walking around the church, or can be browsed through at leisure, but in general it deals with what interests today's visitors. J.E.Ray's paper (see end references) gives a more detailed historic account.

If visitors take home a new view of our town after reading this "Introduction", if it whets the appetite of the newcomer to discover more; if it stimulates the indigenous to strive for the preservation of what remains of our historic past, then it will have achieved its purpose.

Compiled by
Philip J. Offord
April 1993

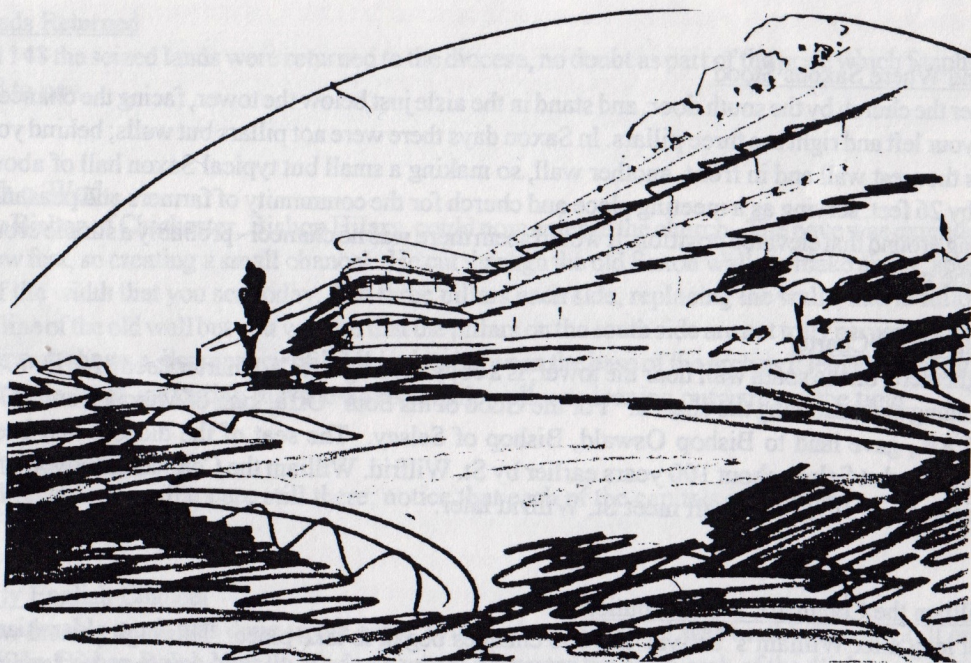
AN INTRODUCTION TO HISTORIC BEXHILL

Behind its facade of quiet refinement, Bexhill simply reeks of history. Much of it neglected, some might even say suppressed, so that even many of its own residents did not know about some important aspects.

BEXHILL MUSEUM

The Pavilion

One exception must be the 1933-1935 De La Warr Pavilion which remains today as a building unique for its time, with its great spiral south stairs, and cantilevered north staircase. Designed by the eminent German architect Erich Mendelsohn, who had been born in Allenstein, East Prussia, studied architecture in Berlin and Munich, and was a refugee from Hitler's rise to power in 1933. The Pavilion was acclaimed as something "we have all dreamed about". Today it serves as an entertainment centre for the town, presenting the best in family entertainment.



SKETCH: ERICH MENDELSON 1933

St. PETER'S CHURCH

Bexhill's Ancient History

For Bexhill's REAL history a walk (or a bus!) up the hill to the Old Town is essential. A visit to the 8th c. parish church of St. Peter is almost obligatory. Today's church belies its ancient origin, being nothing like the original Saxon building, but its development over the centuries can still be traced. The base of the tower built just after William the Conqueror's 1066 invasion still stands, though it has been raised several feet since.

Iron Age Fort ?

The church sits on the highest ground for miles. As you approach from Church Street, notice that the hill top takes on an artificial contour conveniently accommodating the church and the churchyard. Theory has it that the mound on which the original Saxon hall stood could have been an iron age fort, possibly centuries before the birth of Christ, and where Pagan burial rites might well have taken place.

Stand Where Saxons Stood

Enter the church by the south door, and stand in the aisle just below the tower, facing the chancel. To your left and right are three pillars. In Saxon days there were not pillars but walls; behind you was the west wall and in front another wall, so making a small but typical Saxon hall of about 15 by 26 feet, serving as a meeting place and church for the community of farmers and peasants living around that elevated position. It would seem there was no chancel - probably a simple cross on the wall.

King Offa's Charter

Right there, on the south wall near the tower, is a copy of King Offa's Charter deed of A.D. 772, founding and endowing the church. "For the Good of his Soul" Offa, king of Mercia from 757-796 a.d., gave land to Bishop Oswald, Bishop of Selsey. The seat of the diocese had been established at Selsey about 100 years earlier by St. Wilfrid. William the Conqueror moved it to Chichester in 1075. We shall meet St. Wilfrid later.

William the Conqueror's Contribution

Not long after William's arrival in 1066 changes began to take place. This high ground was the ideal site for an observation post giving him surveillance of the area between his landing ground at Norman's Bay right over to the castle at Hastings, so that his soldiers would immediately see any signs of peasant uprisings.

Political Convenience

One of William's justifications for his invasion of England was to bring the Church of England more under the control of Rome, so to build a tower for the church would be seen as an early gesture of good will. Not long after the invasion he set the base for today's tower, although it was not built quite as high as it is today.

William's Land-Grab

St. Peter's is a typical parish church. It seems presumptuous to suggest that actions taken by William the Conqueror could affect our parish church, but his defiance of Offa's Charter, by seizing land belonging to the church as rewards to his barons, prevented any plans the bishops had to develop this part of their eastern diocese.

Appeals for the return of the land were unsuccessful, but in 1144, during the reign of King Stephen, Pope Innocent III died, and the new pope appointed the Archbishop of Canterbury to be his legate in England, a post previously held by the Bishop of Winchester, who was Stephen's brother Henry. Stephen protested so much that his court was excommunicated, and Stephen could only get out of it by giving large donations, promises and privileges to the church.

Lands Returned

In 1148 the seized lands were returned to the diocese, no doubt as part of the price which Stephen had to pay.

12th c. Work

The Bishop of Chichester, Bishop Hilary, could now enlarge the church. The nave was extended a few feet, so creating a small chancel. He cut through the old Saxon walls to make aisles, about half the width that you see today. The three pillars each side, replacing the walls, had to follow the line of the old wall but you will see that the pillars on the south side are not truly perpendicular. One arch shows a discrepancy of 1 3/4 inches between the base of the arch as it leaves the capital and at its apex, indicating that the Saxon south wall was leaning outwards at the time.

Late Norman Pillars

Bishop Hilary's pillars are still there; notice that each of the capitals is different.

Early English Chancel

Considerable work was done in the early 13th c. A new chancel was built between 1230 and 1240 by Bishop Ralph Neville. Today a mural decorates the north arch of the 4th bay - i.e., the arch of the Batesford Chantry, about which more later. The new chancel commenced at the west side of that mural, and an arch was built between the nave and the chancel. The mural arch did

not exist in the 13th c. That early English chancel was about 16 feet west of today's chancel, and only slightly smaller.

Remains of the Chancel

None of Bishop Neville's chancel remains today, but that arch which was between it and the nave was carefully dismantled when major alterations were made in 1878, and it was reconstructed as the arch of today's chancel.

Four Early English Arches

Bishop Neville also extended both the aisles by cutting through the walls of the late Norman chancel, constructing the two arches of today's third bay. The fourth 13th c. arch, also built by Bishop Neville, is between the nave and the tower.

1400 - 1450

The next building phase had to wait about 200 years, and then two new chapels were added. The first one, now long gone, occupied an area of the south aisle just below the existing Lady Chapel. It is thought to have been built in the first quarter of the 15th c. its only significance to us today is in respect of an ancient window to be referred to later.

The Batisford Chantry

The second Lady Chapel was built in the second quarter of the 15th c., at the west end of the north aisle. It was endowed as a chantry by Joan, the widow of Sir William Brenchley who died in 1446. Joan's father was Wm. Batisford, Constable of Pevensey. In Joan's will, dated 6th August 1453, the executors are charged with the foundation of the chantry, and an extract from the lengthy deed embodying the procedure can be seen in a frame by the chantry chapel.

An Interesting Deed

The Deed ordaining the chapel as the "Batesford Chauntry", appoints John Bowyer as the first Chaplain. It also ordains that he and his successors celebrate daily IN PERPETUITY service for the souls of the Brenchley and Batisford family. It continues: "no monk (religiosus), Welshman, Irishman or Scotchman, or anyone born elsewhere than in England may be made Chaplain of the Chantry". Pre-reformation days of Henry VIth.

Church of St.Peter and Paul

That had been the name of the church, and is referred to as such in the Batisford Deed.

Perpetuity ?

Sixty or seventy years on came Henry VI 11th, and the Reformation. In 1547 Henry's nine-years-old son, Edward VIth, succeeded to the throne, and all chantries were suppressed - no doubt directed by Henry's Archbishop Cranmer. So much for perpetuity!

Survival of the Chantry

Many chantry chapels were then neglected, and fell into ruin. The ravages of time were arrested with the arrival of Dr. Thomas Pie as vicar in 1589. Dr. Pie paved and generally repaired the chantry chapel, and used it as a schoolroom, one of the first, if not the first, in Bexhill.

Buttresses by Dr. Pie

The vicar was also concerned about the south wall. Remember that it had been built when the aisle was widened by Bishop Hilary in the 12th c. Now, in the late 16th c. it was leaning dangerously. Dr. Pie erected two large external buttresses, one in 1599 and another in 1607.

Memorials to Dr. Pie

Each of those buttresses was surmounted with a corbel stone, and was inscribed with his name and the initials of his churchwardens. The 1599 one also had a sundial. When the major alterations of 1878 were carried out, those corbels were saved. The 1599 corbel is to be found on a stone pedestal, with its sundial, just outside and to the left of the porch. The 1607 corbel is more difficult to locate. It is built into one of the small buttresses of the present (1878) south wall - turn left out of the porch, and look about the centre of that wall. The letters are now very feint: T PIE D 1607 IC TM.

Plaque to Dr. Pie

Dr. Pie loved his chantry chapel. He is buried there at his own request, and you will find a plaque to his memory there. Another memorial to him could be the Church Registers for he started them in 1558, compiling the first years from scattered papers. He was a bit late in fact, for Thomas Cromwell instituted the registration of births and deaths when he was vicar-general in 1538.

St. Veronica's Headcloth

At the south side of the Chantry Chapel is a small painting - artist unknown. It is said to depict the headcloth offered in sympathy by Veronica of Jerusalem to our Lord as He went along the Via Dolorosa to Calvary. After mopping His brow and returning the cloth His sacred features were impressed upon it. The story is very controversial. *

Forces' Memorials

Other wall plaques and a Roll of Honour in memory of parishioners who gave the ultimate sacrifice in war are also in the chapel. The stained glass windows are tributes to the Allied Armies of the 1st World War, portraying St. Denis, France; St. George, Britain; St. Michael, Belgium; St. Anthony for Italy and Portugal. The commemorative glass and the oak Roll of Honour form the parish War Memorial.

* Enc Brit 1946 V.23 p90a

Queen Victoria's Jubilee

The window in the east wall of the chantry often occasions remarks, its uninspiring gray backing of the mullions and tracery being in drab contrast to the colourful glass. Until 1878 it had been just like any other window, with a clear aspect outside, but in that year of major alterations a vestry was built about six feet away leaving a small rectangular area between the chantry and the vestry. In 1887 stained glass was put in that window, as part of the parish gift celebrating the Queen's golden jubilee. It stayed there only twenty years.

The Window and the Organ

The organ merits its own story, but briefly, a three-manual instrument acquired in 1892 was installed in the south aisle Lady Chapel. In 1907 it was moved to that little space between the vestry and the chantry, so the stained glass had to be removed. Guess what happened to that glass.

The Mural

The striking mural done in 1951 is the work of the eminent archaeological artist Alan Sorrell. With the Ss. Peter and Paul are the Sussex Church's very special saints, Wilfrid and Richard. The church's own Norman tower is there too.

The Galleries

1878 saw the most important architectural changes for 600 years, since Bishop Hilary (1148) and Bishop Neville (1230). By 1876 when a new incumbent, the Rev. Leopold Stanley Clark, was installed galleries had been erected over both aisles and across the tower end of the church to cope with the growing parish. The date they were put up is elusive, probably the 18th c; they did nothing for the beauty of the church.

The new vicar took advice from William Butterfield, an eminent architect of the day, on how to improve matters, and out of their deliberations came extensive alterations.

The 1878 Alterations

Today's choir, chancel, vestry, south aisle, and the Lady Chapel were all part of the alterations. The tower was raised a few feet, and its window and door renewed. Two stepped buttresses had supported the tower, but with the added height a third was added, possibly in anticipation of two extra bells installed in 1892. Evidence of that extra buttress is still visible on the exterior.

The South Aisle

The old leaning wall and Dr. Pie's buttresses were pulled down, the aisle widened, and a new porch built. After the alterations, as you entered the church there was a wall to your left. The aisle, though wider, was still to your right just as when the old Saxon walls were pierced in 1148.

The Lady Chapel

As well as being widened the south aisle was also extended along with the new chancel. The small Lady Chapel built c. 1425 was lost but there is a significant reminder of it still in the church. More about that later.

The Choir and Chancel

The Rev. Stanley Clarke's chancel extends about 23 feet east of Bishop Neville's, and is slightly larger. The early English chancel endured 600 years. The 1878 chancel has a long way to go, but it is well into its second century.

Chancel Murals

A beautiful mural in the chancel, The Incarnation, is often overlooked because it is in a dark place above the cedilla on the south wall. Another, showing prophets and saints is on the north wall. The ceiling of the choir represents the keys of St. Peter and other biblical symbols. The needlework of the cushions on the cedilla and the altar are the work of the St. Peter's Needlework group.

The Reredos

Look closely at the detail in the reredos. A panel depicting the Lord ascending surrounded by angels singing praises surmounts The Last Supper, where the disciples are seen with the oddments of a meal, fruit representing the fruits of the earth, a sleeping dog, and Judas Iscariot clutching his money bag and knocking over the salt as he hastens to betray his Master. The eyes of Judas are averted from the spectator for fear that if they should meet the eyes of a worshipper some actual communion might be set up between them.

Niches on each side portray Peter in his agony of denial, a cockerel at his feet; and on the other side, in his ecstasy as keeper of the keys to the Kingdom.

Four Beasts of the Apocalypse

In the corners of the central panel are the enigmatic four beasts of the Apocalypse, mentioned in Ezekiel in the Old Testament, and in St. John's Revelation. They are not often seen twice in a church, but there they are again, just above you in the beautiful east window.

The Seven Holy Angels

A delicate window in the chancel's south wall portrays the seven holy angels offering worship before the throne of God. They are mentioned in the Apocrypha (Tobit Ch. 12).

The Organs

Before the days of organs minstrels provided the music. They were grouped in the gallery across the tower, and when they played the congregation would stand, turn, and "face the music". Barrel organs were invented in Holland about 1550, and after Cromwell's inter-regnum they were re-introduced into churches - not particularly well received by minstrel groups!

The date which St. Peter's acquired a barrel organ is not known, but it was in use until 1881, and still works today.

About 1880 a small manual organ replaced the barrel organ, but in 1892 it was replaced by a three-manual instrument. It stood in the Lady Chapel, but being a much larger instrument than earlier models, it was not the ideal situation. In 1907 other alterations were carried out, and the little space between the Batisford Chantry (c.1450) and the vestry (1878) was bricked off to accommodate it. But if the organ was to be heard, the stained glass in the Batisford Chantry east window had to be removed. In 1907 the console was made an integral part of the organ on the north side of the choir, but in 1947, by the magic of electric controls, it was moved to its present position, better for the vicar, the choir, and the organist.

That organ served over a hundred years, until 1992/93, when a new one went into the same space.

The Chancel and Lady Chapel Screens

The beautiful oak screens are resplendent with carvings. Angels, the Lord's Cross and the Passion on the Chancel screen, and on the Lady Chapel screen are songbirds surmounted by musical instruments like harps, cymbals, trumpets and psalteries, instruments of the Old Testament. The screens probably date from c.1900.

Above the chancel screen are figures of Our Lord supported by the Blessed Virgin and St. John, the work of Martin Travers, and were presented to the church in 1948.

The Pulpit and the Lectern

The rector in 1959, Clifford Earwaker, described the pulpit as "one of the finest pieces of craftsmanship in Sussex." There is the Good Shepherd, St. Peter with a little model of the church, St. Paul, and again the Sussex church's special saints, Wilfrid and Richard. The lectern, with its prophets and saints, complements it proudly

More Alterations - and the Chantry Window

In 1907 the north aisle was widened, and the organ was built into the little space between the chantry and the vestry. Now the south aisle was extended westward also, so linking it up with the tower. The aisle north of the tower already existed - prior to 1878 it was probably screened off from the rest of the aisle and used as a vestry and assembly area for the minstrels, and later the choir.

The Jubilee Glass

The windows in this new south aisle extension were designed to accommodate that glass displaced by the organ re-arrangement. The theme of the glass, a parish gift celebrating Queen Victoria's golden jubilee, is taken from the 23rd Psalm.

In the Tower

The tower holds several items of interest. There is a useful plan showing how the church grew from Saxon days. There is a notice recording the grant of £100 towards the 1878 alterations - it spelt the end of private pews. There is an early 13th c. Cross Slab found in the north aisle during the 1878 alterations, and believed to be from the tomb of a Crusader.

The Font

This is an exact replica in Sussex marble of an earlier one which was too decayed to be moved from the nave where it stood until 1878. its theme is "the water of regeneration", and frogs and fishes are in the carvings. A brass plate at the base carries a conjectural etching of what the original Saxon church or hall may have looked like.

The Stained Glass

The church is well endowed with stained glass windows. Most are self explanatory - The Walking on the Water, Mary Magdalene's encounter with Jesus at the empty sepulchre, are both in the south aisle. Appropriately above the font is "Christ Blessing the Children". Near the Ancient window is another of St. Nicholas, one of Christendom's most popular saints, special protector of children and sailors (among others). This window was a gift from the parish children in 1908. The altar table below this window is dedicated to St. Richard.

The Choir Vestry

In the north wall is a door which leads to a choir vestry built in 1966. Above the door is a small ogee niche containing a statuette, and about which visitors often ask. Surprisingly, since that wall was not built until 1907, nothing seems to be known about this figure, so possibly the image came from some other place in the church during alterations.

Sometimes there would be a niche in side walls of porches, with the figure of a saint, perhaps the church's patron saint. * So it might have been with the pre-1878 church, such detail not being now known. During the work on the south wall at that time this figure might have been put into storage, and restored to use in 1907. Holding what could be a net, the image might be either St. Peter or St. Wilfrid.

That items were stored can be seen from the wall plaque to Richard Alfray now in the tower section of the south aisle - built 1907. Photos extant show that it had been in the old chancel, pulled down in 1878. Plaques and grave stones were often left only half inscribed so that loved ones could be remembered together.

* "Imagery of British Churches" by M.D. Anderson p.40 Pub: Jphn Murry)

Ss. Wilfrid and Richard

The Church's special saints are commemorated in the east window of the south aisle Lady Chapel. There are special paragraphs about Wilfrid and Richard later. In the Chapel's south wall is St. Michael, a much more delicate work than glass of the same Saint in the Chantry Chapel.

The Ancient Window

Most people like stained glass windows. A treasure in the north wall of St. Peter's is thought to be 15th c. continental work. It has an unusual history, having been removed by Horace Walpole in the 1760's, finding its way to Bury St. Edmunds 45 years after Walpole's death in 1797, and returning to St. Peter's in the 1920's. There is a little potted history right next to it.

Walpole, son of prime minister Robert Walpole, heard that glass in the south aisle Lady Chapel (c.1425) portrayed Henry 111rd and his wife Eleanor of Provence. He wanted a sketch of it to illustrate a book he was publishing, but in the 1760's he got possession of it by way of his friend Lord Ashburnham, who was related to the vicar William Ashburnham. It was put in Walpole's chapel at Strawberry Hill, Twickenham. Walpole died in 1797, and his effects were sold in 1842. It went to Sir Thomas Gerry Cullum of Bury St. Edmunds, passed to his grandson, and when he heard of its origin he most generously bequeathed it to St. Peter's Church, and it returned in 1921. Perhaps the church knew of the legacy when the north wall was built in 1907, so that the north wall window was designed accordingly.

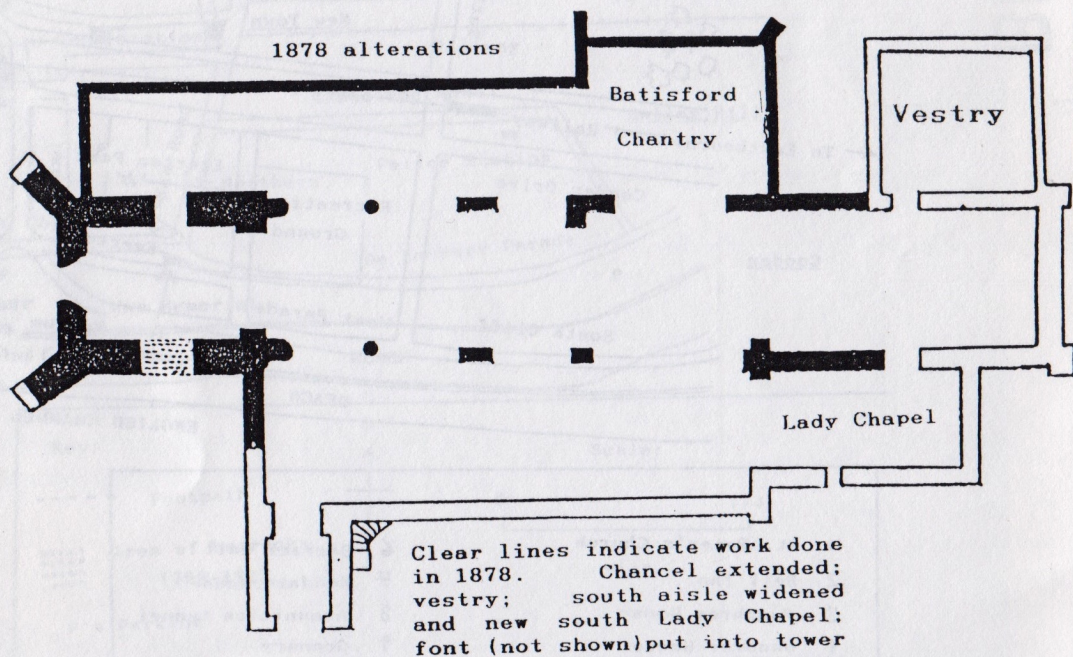
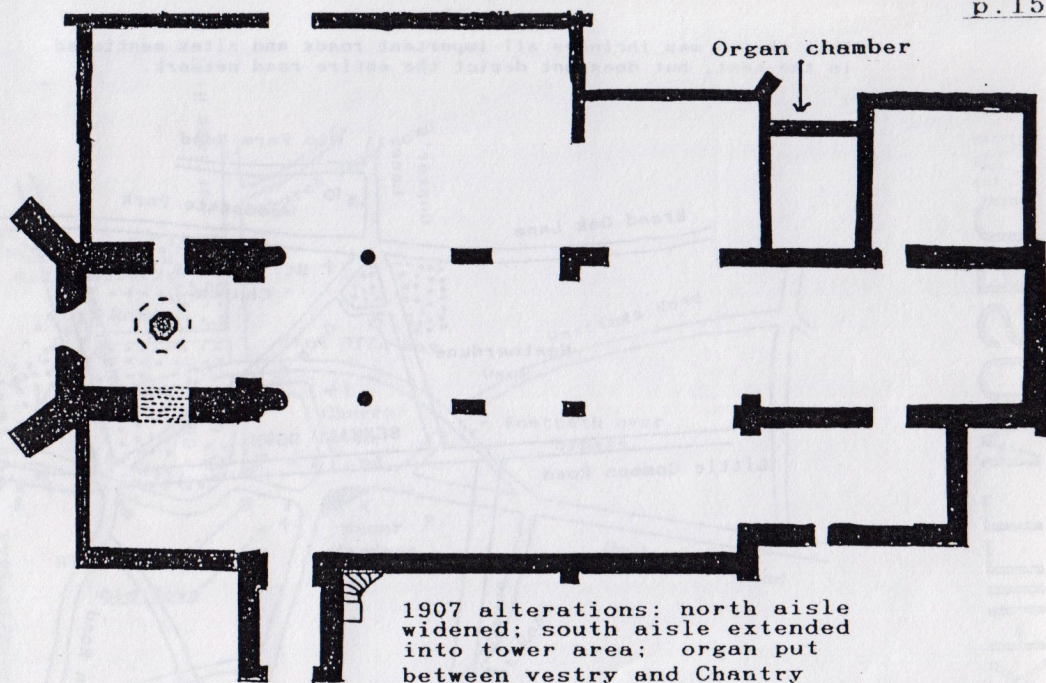
It is generally agreed today that the central figures of the glass are not Henry and Eleanor, nor, as was also suggested, Edward 111rd and HIS wife Philippa, but are of Christ and the Virgin Mary. Smaller panels of saints support the central figures.

Fortunate Vandalism ?

Walpole's removal of the window, might be thought of as near-vandalism but was perhaps fortuitous, as otherwise we would probably not have it today. Stained glass techniques changed in the 16th c. and brighter colours became possible, like the other glass in the church. When the little south Lady Chapel was demolished in 1878 it would almost certainly have been destroyed. In Victorian days many churches pulled out old windows just to make way for the bright new colours of the day.

Ten Bells

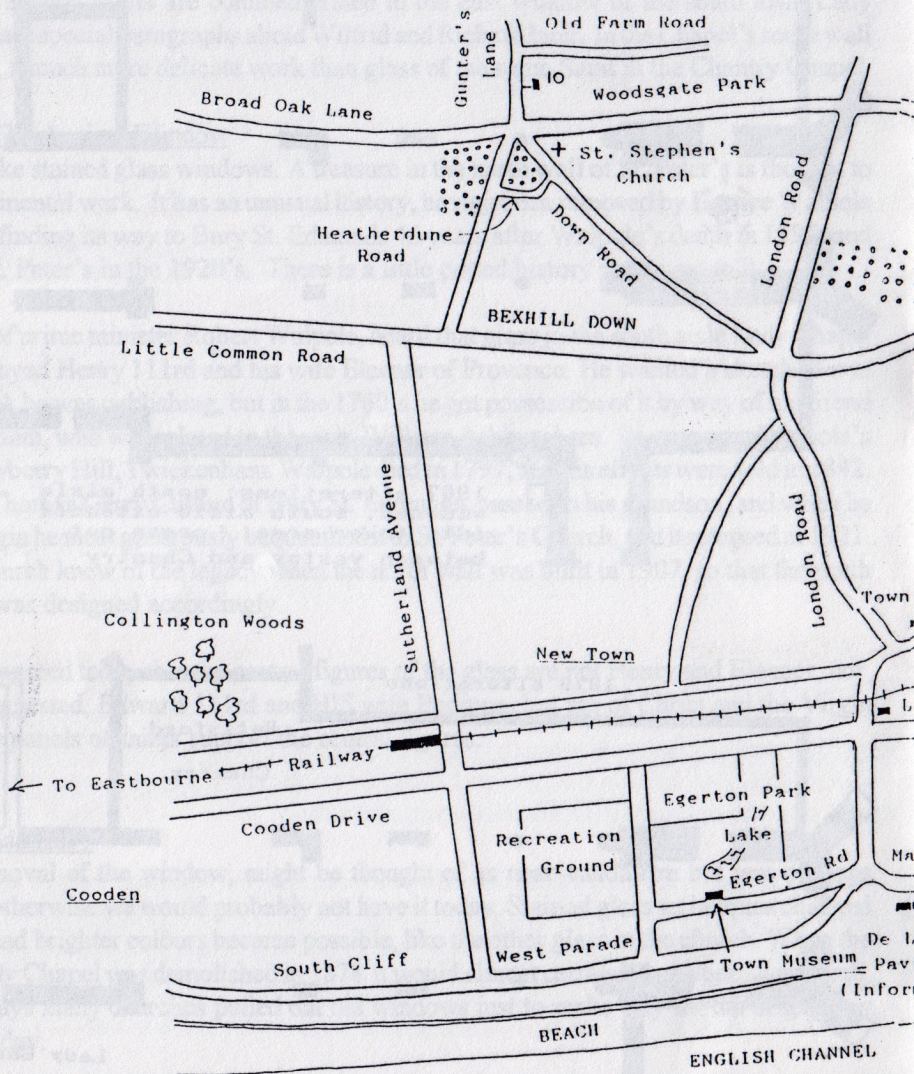
The weight of bells in the belfry is well over three tons. Six were there when the major alterations of 1878 were carried out, four dating from before 1769, though they have been recast. Two more, weighing over 8 cwt, were added in 1892, four years after two stepped buttresses were added to the tower. Two more bells were installed 100 years later to give today's peal of ten. At that time major reinforcement was provided by steel girders inside the tower.



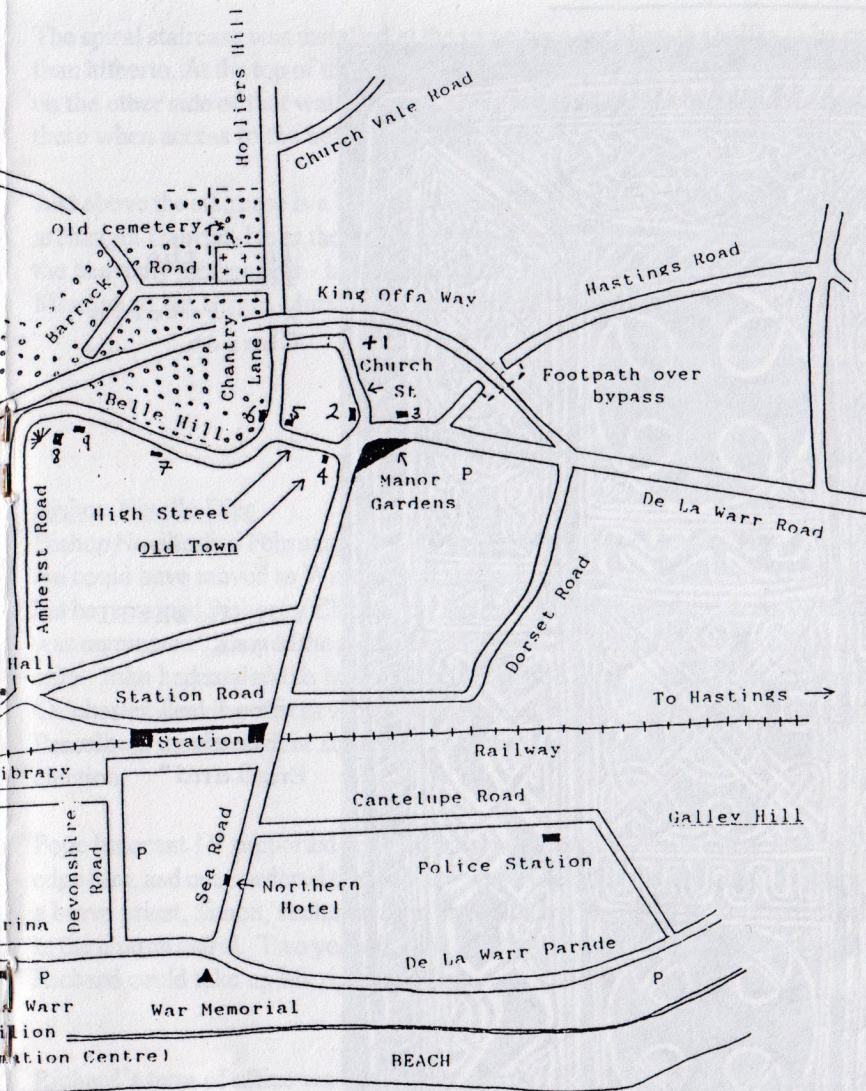
Floor plan (not to scale) showing 1878 & 1907 changes
(Choir vestry built 1966 is not included)

This sketch map includes all important roads and sites mentioned in the text, but does not depict the entire road network.

BEXHILL MUSEUM



- | | |
|----------------------|---------------------|
| 1 St. Peter's Church | 6 Barrack Hall |
| 2 Bell Inn | 7 Goddard House |
| 3 Pumphrey House | 8 Ammunition tunnel |
| 4 Hanover House | 9 Granary |
| 5 Pococks | 10 Woodgate Farm |



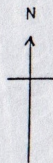
Key:

--- Footpath

Area of barracks
1798-1822

p = Parking

☼ Viewpoint



Scale:

0 1/4
Mile

Map by A.D. Uffindell

"THE BEXHILL STONE"



In the
Tower,
St. Peter's
Church

"The Bexhill
Stone
has no
parallel
elsewhere in
England"

Drawing by
Mrs. Mary
Tinker

The spiral staircase was installed at the same time enabling the belfry to be reached more easily than hitherto. At the top of the staircase is a little door, and if you look at the corresponding spot on the other side of that wall you will see a small platform. Before the stairs, a ladder was put there when access to the belfry was necessary.

Just above the staircase is a beam end on a corbel which is carved into a figure thought to be the archangel Gabriel. He is there again in the corner to the west of that one. Gabriel, foremost of the heavenly messengers - he announced the birth of John the Baptist to Zaccharias, and of the Messiah to the Virgin Mary - is a patron saint of broadcasters.

The Story of St. Richard

Bishop Neville Dies

Bishop Neville died February 1st 1244 in his palace, now Lincoln's Inn, Chancery Lane, London. He could have moved to Winchester, and was offered the office of Archbishop of Canterbury, but he remained Bishop of Chichester. Richard of Wych (derived from his birthplace, Droitwich) was nominated bishop of the diocese but Henry 111rd, who succeeded John in 1216, just one year after John had sealed the Magna Carta, wanted to appoint Robert Passelewe, archdeacon of Chichester - leaving offices vacant or appointing his own man enabled Henry to get extra revenue. Passelewe was an ardent supporter of Henry, and Boniface, Archbishop elect, quashed that election.

Pope Innocent IV supported Richard's nomination, but despite that, Henry refused to acknowledge him, and even ordered that nobody was to help him in any way. In Tarring, near Worthing, a brave priest, Simon, sheltered him, and Richard planted a fig tree in his garden. It is depicted in the church mural. Two years passed and threats of excommunication were to be made before Richard could take up his rightful office.

Richard's term of office was turbulent, earning him with Wilfrid a special place in the Sussex Church. He was a champion of the Church throughout his years in office, years in which Henry was in conflict with the Church and the barons. Richard died in 1253, aged 55 years, and was canonised only nine years later.

Wilfrid and the Bexhill Stone

The Bexhill Stone, mounted in the tower, was discovered under the south aisle during the extensive 1878 alterations, and is established as being 8th c. Celtic. Reputed to be the lid of a reliquary (a casket containing relics of saints) once belonging to St. Wilfrid, it is possibly the oldest Christian carving in Sussex. Carved in several panels, it depicts Maltese crosses, Greek

symbols, plants and other traditional expressions of harmony. If it is Wilfrid's reliquary, he might have designed it himself, for he had a great interest in architecture, and in early days he had his own team of skilled masons who travelled around with him. *

Wilfrid's Story

Wilfrid's prominence as one of the Sussex church's special saints derives from his bringing Christianity to Sussex. Surrounded by marshes, dense forests, and sea, it was the last remnant of England for Christianity to penetrate. The story of how he was shipwrecked off the Sussex coast in 666 a.d. when he was 32 years of age, escaped being murdered by the pagan natives, escaped back to his bishopric in York only to find that in his absence King Oswy, assuming he had died, had given his bishopric to somebody else, and his return to convert Sussex, has all the elements of a suspense story. And that is only part of his life story. To his strength of argument we can attribute the system by which Easter is calculated **

Years later when Wilfrid returned from York to the Sussex pagans, miracles seemed to occur. There had been a prolonged drought during which animals died and crops failed. The natives were starving. They only knew how to catch eels, using little nets, and Wilfrid showed them that by joining these nets together and casting them into the sea they could catch fish. It is said they caught 300 fish the very first time, to the gratitude of the pagans, who were then eager to listen to all he had to say. One day in 681 a.d. Wilfrid baptised many Earls and thanes into the Christian Church, and miraculously, rain fell in plenty ending the drought. The Saxon King Ethelreda rewarded him with a grant of land at Selsey where he established a monastery. The See was removed to Chichester in 1075. ***

How did the reliquary get to St. Peter's? It may be assumed that following the establishment of his monastery at Selsey Wilfrid consecrated meeting places wherever there were Saxon settlements. By custom since the 4th c. consecration required some sacred relic to be incorporated in the altar table, and theory has it that Wilfrid provided a relic from his own reliquary for St. Peter's. Could it be that by the time the little Saxon meeting place in Bexhill was being consecrated Wilfrid, contemplating his return to York and deciding to travel light, got himself a nicely carved wooden box, and presented his stone reliquary to the church?

How it got buried a mere six inches below ground - hardly a serious effort at deliberate hiding - could depend on how it was used by the church. A good firm slab, but being chamfered not practical as an altar table where, especially in early times, were placed the Cross and candles.

* Enc. Brit. 1946 Vol. 23 p 601

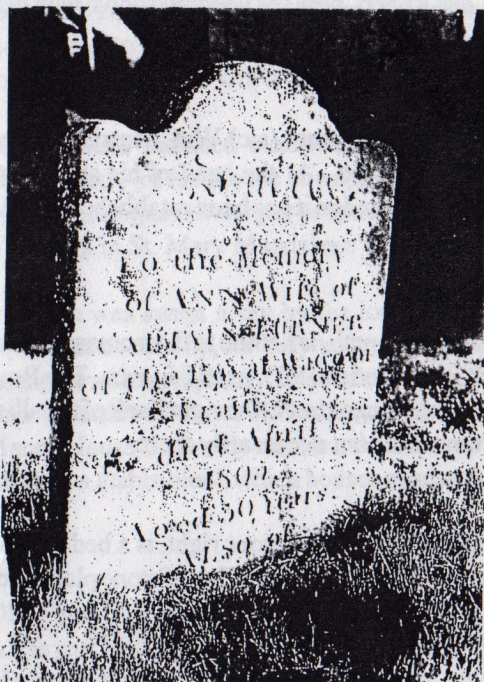
***"The Anglo-Saxon Age" by D.J.V. Fisher pp. 82-85 Pub:Longman Group Ltd. 1973

****"How the Church came to England" by Gertrude Hollis p.131 & Bede's "History of the English Church & People" Penguin 1986 p227

Did it just stand in the church, a tiny 26 feet by 15 feet ? Probably its best use would have been at the door of the church, where its design of crosses, and including an inverted serpent which usually signified the devil, would stress the moral contrasts of Good and Evil as worshippers entered the doors of the early church. * As a backing for a stoup of holy water, or set on the ground nearby, it would signify the contrast between those within the fold of the Church and those in the doom outside.

Where it was found, under the nave floor near the first Norman pier on the south side, supports it being near a door of the pre-1066 church. Taken in conjunction with the alterations of a thousand years, the stone may have just sunk down where it was found, just as flatbed gravestones sunk into the ground, sometimes in less than a hundred years.

Were the archaeologists right about it being a reliquary, and not as was once thought, even as recently as the 1940's, the lid of a child's stone coffin ?** This suggestion was considered unlikely only because the elaborate ornamentation could not have been intended for burial out of sight. Nevertheless, there are stone Saxon grave covers much more elaborate, e.g. at Wirksworth, Derbyshire.*** Regardless of whether it was a grave cover or the lid of a reliquary, it has "has no parallel elsewhere in England" ****



* Mrs. Mary Tinker, expert antiquarian

** "The Parish Church of S.S. Peter and Paul": British Publishing Co. Gloucester p.17

*** Pl.2."Imagery of British Churches" by M.D. Anderson, F.S.A. John Murray Pub.1955

**** Sir Thomas Kendrick, formerly Keeper of British Antiquities at the British Museum.

The Churchyard

There have probably been burials around the church since Saxon days although there are no known relics attributed to the site. While you are there why not conjure up some ghosts ? The ghosts could be soldiers who were in Bexhill between 1796 and 1815 who fought - and died - in the Peninsular Wars and at the battle of Waterloo. There are five stones which are associated with soldiers of those days.

The Lychgate

Lychgates have been in England since the 4th or 5th century, but being usually of wood, not many old ones are left. St. Peter's is no exception, although it does date from 1906. Tradition is that the clergy meet the funeral party at the gate and read part of the service - "lych" being the old Saxon word for "corpse".

The Ghosts

To your right on entering the lychgate, in the S.E. area of the churchyard, is a stone to Robert White, of the 11th Light Dragoons, who was drowned in 1804. It is reasonably well established that Robert, only 25 years old, was exercising his horse on the beach, and while riding in and out of the water, his horse slipped, and Robert, perhaps weighted down with his riding habit, was unable to save himself.

A Freemason

The stone next to Robert White is to Drill-serjeant (sic) Wm. Morrison who was 42 years old when he died in 1806, after 30 years service. At the head of his stone is the symbol of the Freemasons, and through Masons Hall in London it has been established that Wm. Morrison was very likely in that Order.

Shades of Hougoumont

A few yards in from the Lychgate, left of the path, is a stone to the memory of Ann, wife of Captain Turner of the Royal Waggon Train. Ann died in 1805, aged 36 years. The Royal Waggon Train is known to have supplied the garrison at Hougoumont, the right flank of the allied line at the battle of Waterloo, although Captain Turner was not necessarily there.

The Bedboard

A few steps along the path from the lychgate, and to your right, is a bedhead or bedboard stone. This design probably derived from the simple horizontal slab of stone placed across two uprights used in pagan times..

Interesting Stones

Stones which have family names spilling over on both sides, as extra interments were made are quite rare. There is just one in the churchyard. It is for the Edmonds family, and on one side is Mary Ann, and on the other is Sarah. Today it is hardly legible. Also in the south east corner is

a stone to William Harris who was accidentally killed by his own waggon running over him in 1869. Near him is another Harris, his stone being to his memory and to his two wives and ten children. He died in 1881, and if you find it, look closely at the date - December 7th. The stone mason made a mistake in that date and had to alter it.

The Oldest Stone

A four year old boy, Elphick Brooke, seems to have the oldest legible stone. It is on the north side of the church, and is dated Dec. 26th 1748, indicating a sad Christmas for the Brooke family. Other interesting stones include two more on the north side which are to members of soldiers families. Not all the church guides know where they are, but if you are particularly interested they can tell you how to contact someone who does.

The Manor House

The Manor Garden is only short walk from the church which is appropriate, because the Manor House served as the eastern residence of the Bishops of Chichester for hundreds of years up to the 1560's as they journeyed to the eastern parts of their diocese. The house had several 13th c. arches and window spaces. There is still a Tudor window to be found in the ruins today.

Later occupants of the house included members of the De La Warr family; Sir Robert Harmsworth, brother of Lord Northcliffe the newspaper tycoon, and a lesser known figure Mr. Neven Du Mont, son of a Cologne newspaper proprietor. Mr. Du Mont was an artist, and his work, "Crucifixion", hangs in St. Mary Magdalene's Church, Bexhill.

The ancient Manor House was swept away by the local Council in 1968 in a road widening scheme - probably quite unnecessarily, for only ten years on the construction of the King Offa bypass funnelled through traffic completely clear of the town. The tranquility and charm of an old village, which once boasted a centuries old walnut tree as its focal point, disappeared virtually overnight. Of the Manor House there only remains the barn, now used for functions, the coach house, now a hospice, and a stable block which houses a museum of costume and social history.

Clocks

Prominent in the Old Town is a clock on a picturesque building which was in early days a warehouse. The clock is part of the town's gift commemorating Queen Victoria's golden jubilee. Near the Bexhill Museum is a clock tower, and that is the town's memorial to King Edward VIIth.

Napoleon and the Hanoverians

Short Lane

Over to the N. W. of the church there is a path going down to Chantry Lane. About two- thirds of the way down and to your left there are a couple of mounting blocks set into the wall. They would have been used by the soldiers and civilians of the day to mount and dismount from their horses when they came to church.

The Old Barracks Cemetery

At the foot of that path turn right into Chantry Lane, and just across the road you will see Barrack Road. A few yards along Barrack Road is an open space which was in use as a cemetery until the end of the last century.

The King's German Legion

Over 180 soldiers, or members of their families, who were stationed in the town during the Napoleonic troubles were buried in the Barrack Road cemetery. Many were German soldiers or their families who found themselves in Bexhill after Napoleon's army had marched into Hanover in 1803. In those days Hanover was ruled by our own King George 111rd. Thousands of Hanoverian soldiers escaped to England and volunteered to serve in an elite corps known as the King's German Legion.

The Duke of Cambridge

The King's newly formed K.G.L. pleased him so much that he appointed his youngest son, the Duke of Cambridge, as their colonel-in-Chief. Many of them would have worshipped at St. Peter's Church, and it is known that the Duke attended a service there. There are many Hanoverian births, marriages and deaths recorded in the Parish Register.

Extent of the Barracks

If you feel like walking down the footpath which should be on your left at this point, you will come to a small stream, now carried in a gully. The area all around you, to your front, at your rear, and either side of you were open fields in the early 1800's, of course. The stream marked the north boundary of land commandeered by H.M. Commissioners under an Act of Parliament for use as barracks.

Where Soldiers Walked

From the old Barrack Road cemetery return to the church by the same way you came. Go through Church Street and you will see The Bell Inn. Already well established by 1796, it would have been one of the "locals" for many of the troops, including over 11,000 men of the K.G.L. Could well be a ghost or two in The Bell!

Building Boom - 18th c.

Take a look at the clapboard houses adjoining The Bell Inn. They appear to be of the late 18th c., and there is some speculation that they could have been constructed to accommodate the thousands of troops flooding into Bexhill - not much more than a large village at the time. In those days licensees were obliged to arrange accommodation when needed for military contingencies. Did the influx of all these men prompt the owner of The Bell Inn to build extra accommodation in this way, doing himself a bit of good at the same time ? Records of those days are not easily uncovered, but this theory is being pursued.

Birth of the Barracks System

It's interesting to note that at that time barracks as we know them now did not exist. The billeting and provisioning of the British army became a special branch in 1792 when Parliament granted George III approval for the construction of permanent barracks. Major Oliver de Lancey, veteran of the American Revolutionary wars, was appointed the first Barrack Master General in 1794 and consequently, barrack huts began to get constructed in Bexhill during the first ten years of the 19th c.

Wealden House

The Lychgate Restaurant in Church Street is a 15th c. Wealden house. Only one other is thought to have survived. A Wealden house was designed for communal living, and in medieval days would have had one large hall extending from floor to rafters, a fireplace in the centre, and would be used by all the occupants. It would have had an overhang at the front and probably along the side. *

Capt. Holtzermann

From Church Street go to your left into De La Warr Road. Just a few yards along are numbers 5 and 7. Possibly they were just one residence originally, and in the days of those Napoleonic troubles Thomas Pumphrey, Customs officer for the area, lived there with his family. His daughter married a K.G.L. officer, Capt. Philip Holtzermann and accompanied her husband on his military duties. Capt. Holtzermann was killed at Waterloo, and his name is on the Waterloo Monument in the centre of Hanover and on the K.G.L. monument at Waterloo. What happened to his wife is not known.

The Road that Led to Waterloo

Only a few yards further along, the first turning on your left, is the old road to Hastings. A whirring, swishing sound of rubber on macadam fills the air today, but the by-pass and its foot-bridge did not appear until the 1980's. Instead, in early 1815 this piece of the Hastings road would have resounded to the rhythmic tread of boots and a muffled clippety-clop of horses hooves, probably on a dirt track, as thousands of K.G.L. and Hanoverian troops started a journey which was to end for so many at Waterloo.

*Bexhill Observer Sept 2nd 1978

Hanover House

Now return to the corner of Church Street. Across the High Street is Hanover House; typically Georgian, it was built in the early 1800's for a German officer, although as yet it has not been possible to find just who. The pretty Tudor-style building next to it, Forge House, is the result of clever conversion from several small cottages. A smithy's forge was on the site, but probably had nothing to do with the army who would have had their own farriers.

Butchers to the Army

Walk along the High Street. There were more shops there around the 1800's catering for all those troops. The one furthest away is a butchers, Pococks, and if you look in the window you will see a marble plaque on the wall with the date 1801 on it. Records have shown that Pocock's supplied meat to the King's German Legion and other troops.

Barrack Hall

Just across the road on the N.W. corner of Belle Hill and Chantry Lane is a large house. This is Barrack Hall, built c.1794, and it was formerly the headquarters of the K.G.L. * and used as their Officers Mess. The wing now fronting Belle Hill was unsympathetically added in mid-Victorian days and obliterated what was a beautiful Georgian facade.

Since the Manor House was demolished, Barrack Hall is no doubt the second most historic building in the Old Town after St. Peter's Church. Most of the land to the west would have been an encampment for the troops, before the existing Belle Hill houses were built c. 1880/90.

On Parade!

At the side of Barrack Hall there is a gate and a path. Go through the gate - it is still now, in 1993, a public open space. You will be entering what was the parade ground for the soldiers in 1796 - 1815. It would appear that the ground was prepared with shingles and flints, probably brought up from the beaches, to make a good marching surface. H.R.H. The Duke of Cambridge, youngest son of George III, Colonel-in-Chief of the King's German Legion, and General Sir Arthur Wellesley (raised to the peerage after victory at Talavera, 1809, and created Duke in 1814) would have inspected their troops right there. Uniform buttons with a crown and the letters "K.G.L." inscribed on them have been found there, among other artefacts.

Now continue your walk down Belle Hill. To your left is a large grey house, Goddard House. It is quite possible that the commanding officer of the K.G.L., Major-General Sir Charles Alten, lived there. It would have been a very fine and suitable property in its day for a high-ranking officer, and it seems to have been built about 1806 which would have been an appropriate date. Gen. von Alten was Hanoverian; he was wounded at Waterloo, and for his conduct during that battle he was created a Count. A look at the left hand side of the front door shows some sort of additional work to the original building has been done at some time.

* Bexhill Chronical, November 1899

Arsenal

A little further on, still on the left, are some timbered buildings. They are typical of buildings which would have been there at the turn of the 18th/19th centuries. Behind them a brick-lined tunnel or cave has been found, built into the hillside, and the method of its construction leads to a belief that it was probably used for ammunition storage or perhaps for powder. Opposite the house called the Granary stood a larger ammunition storage building.

Beer and Boots

Near here was another hostelry which would have been used by the troops - The Queen's Head. It disappeared when the King Offa by-pass was made. The landlord's son, Thomas Barnard, recalled that his father also made the hessian boots worn by the Hanoverian soldiers.* Thomas died in 1860 and his gravestone is in St. Peter's Churchyard.

Cavalry Barracks

Just where Belle Hill bears to the left to join Amherst Road, you will see some steps which will take you to a viewing platform from where there is a splendid view. As you look to the west take your mind back a couple of hundred years and imagine it without all the houses. On the Down itself would be hundreds of tents for the troops standing ready against Napoleon's very real threat of invasion. They were spread across to where St. Stephen's Church is today - you can see the church tower quite plainly. The church was not there in those days, but artillery units and cavalry were in the area.

Baron Ompteda

Close to the St. Stephen's Church area, and just off Gunter's Lane was Woodgate Farm. A cottage still stands there in which Col. Baron Christian von Ompteda is known to have spent some time in convalescence. Col. Ompteda, O.C. of the 2nd Brigade of the K.G.L., lost his life obeying an order to attack from the Prince of Orange despite the Baron pointing out the futility of the order. Baron Ompteda's bravery received special commendation from the Iron Duke, and his name is on the Waterloo Monument in Hanover and the K.G.L. monument at Waterloo.

The Short Walk

The St. Stephen's area may be a bit far for a walk if time is limited, but a walk around St. Peter's church and Belle Hill is within a convenient radius of the Old Town and takes in much of Bexhill's Hanoverian connection. If you drive to St. Stephen's you might go by way of a road which was little more than a cart-track when it was used by the troops. It is Down Road, which runs from the traffic lights at the junction of London Road, King Offa Way and Little Common Road up to Heatherdune Road and the Church. Waggon and horse-drawn cannon would have been the heavy traffic then.

LA HAIE SAINTE, WATERLOO

Continuing Research

Research continues to find more details about the numerous British and Hanoverian troops who were in the town during that Napoleonic period. Major Baring, an officer of the 2nd Light Battalion K.G.L., whose role in defying the French when their victory seemed assured warrants recognition among the great, must have lived in Bexhill, though his exact place of residence has not yet been established.

Major Baring at Waterloo

Major Baring was schooled under the Prussian General Scharnhorst; his heroism at Waterloo has probably been much under-rated. With about 340 men of his K.G.L. battalion, he was entrusted with the defence of one of the battlefield's most strategic sites, the farm la Haie Sainte. The farm, at the centre and several hundred yards ahead of the allied lines, had to be taken if the French could even hope to engage the allied army under Wellington's command. Napoleon knew that well, and committed his best soldiers to eliminate this final obstacle to his victory.

Attack after furious attack was unleashed by the French against the farm but Baring's valiant stand defied them until the early evening of June 18th. By that time, Blucher's army had arrived from the east, and Napoleon had lost the day, the battle, his empire and his ambitions.

Baron von Baring

When the K.G.L. was dissolved in 1816 Major Baring re-enlisted in the Hanoverian army where he became lieutenant-general. In 1832 he was created a baron. He died in 1844 at Wiesbaden where he is buried.

Monument in Hanover

Major Baring's heroism is recognised in Hanover by a monument to him outside the records office.



*Officer and private
of the 1st Light
Battalion, King's
German Legion*

Col Halkett and the wreck of the "Amsterdam"

In 1749 the Dutch East Indiaman "Amsterdam" was lost in a storm off Hastings beach while on its maiden voyage. The first serious salvage attempt was made in 1810 when 200 men of the K.G.L., stationed in Bexhill, were given permission by their commanding officer Col. Hugh Halkett to dig into the ship for copper and anything else they might find.*

Legendary Figure

Col. Halkett enjoyed a legendary reputation in the Hanoverian army. In the final phase of the battle of Waterloo he is credited with one of the most famous incidents of the battle, capturing the French General Cambronne with his own hands by seizing the General's aiguillette.**

After Napoleon's defeat Col. Halkett lived in Hanover, rose to be major-general and inspector general of infantry, and was raised to the nobility in 1862.*** Hugh Halkett was another of the illustrious figures who directly shaped world history, and would have known Bexhill well.

Merry Bexhill

Heroism was not the prerogative of the officers alone. Pte. Lindau was one of Major Baring's men, and fought with him at La Haie Sainte. Although suffering serious head wounds, Pte. Lindau refused to leave his comrades when ordered to retire by Major Baring. In his memoirs, he wrote:-

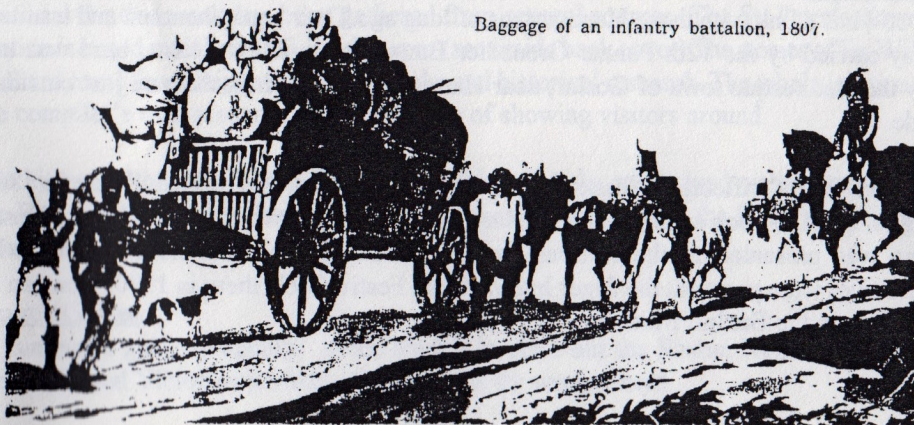
"The time I spent in England - some 18 months - was the best part of my life. Never again was I to lead such a carefree and merry life as in the barracks at Bexhill".

* "Wreck of the Amsterdam" by Peter Marsden p.86

** "Wellington's Military Machine" by Philip J. Haythornthwaite (1989) p.11)

*** Enc.Brittanica 1946 Vol. 11 p.95

Baggage of an infantry battalion, 1807.



WHY BEXHILL

By now readers may be asking themselves why should there have been such a huge military presence in what was until that time a rather insignificant place. The reason is simple. Military surveys along the foreshore found that this stretch of the south coast was particularly vulnerable from the sea. About ten miles between Bulverhythe (just west of St. Leonard's) and Eastbourne, were practically devoid of any natural cliff defences. Ideal for landing from the sea.

The troops were kept out of sight from the sea by being encamped on the north side of the town, making full use of the natural contour of the Down, while being always on the alert should the alarm be raised. It was feared that a pompous Napoleon would make an effort to emulate William the Conqueror and attempt to land near Norman's Bay, a part of Bexhill's outskirts.

Brief History

These few pages are only intended as a glimpse to show how Bexhill's role in former days linked it with people and events which influenced Europe's future.

The "Desert Fox"

In the early 1800's until just before the battle of Waterloo in June 1815, among the troops in the town were the 1st and 2nd Light Infantry Battalions of the King's German Legion. They won battle honours in the Peninsular wars as well as at Waterloo. After 1815 the battalions were disbanded, reorganised, and merged with other forces, always carrying with them their battle honours and traditions. These honours and traditions in time passed to a Panzer division, once under the command of Field Marshal Rommel, the "Desert Fox", possibly the one 2nd World War German officer who won respect even from the Allied armies.

Traditions Today

Bexhill still has a link with those Hanoverians of long ago. Their battle honours and traditions are today carried by the 12th Panzer Grenadier Bn. whose traditional home base was until recently the picturesque town of Goslar, near Hanover, although now they are just outside in Osterode.

In Goslar is a Jager ("rifleman") Museum, and they have a map of part of Bexhill dated c. 1806, showing some of the troop emplacements on land which was then owned by the Duke of Dorset. The map was presented to the Museum by the Bexhill Hanoverian Study Group when representatives were guests at the Jager International Festival held there in 1990. You can see the same map in the Bexhill Museum.

THE HANOVERIAN STUDY GROUP

In the first paragraph of this booklet you read that "even many of (the town's) own residents did not know about some important aspects" (of its history).

The formation of the Bexhill Hanoverian Study Group in February 1989 changed much of that. Group members sifted through public record offices to come up with details of courageous men who must have known Bexhill well. The Group's success in this field of research is unequalled.

The Broad Outlook

Inevitably, research into one aspect of history reveals facts hitherto unsuspected. The result has been that the Study Group's interests now cover the history of Bexhill in almost all its phases, ranging from purely local happenings to events with national and international connections.

Bexhill Museum

In co-operation with the Study Group, the Museum has a display of photographs, documents, and artefacts which shows Bexhill's role in the 18th/19th c.

Illustrated Talks

To further spread the town's history, illustrated talks are given to local and nearby clubs, church groups, institutes, etc. Subjects cover St. Peter's Church; The Churchyard/Barrack Rd. Cemetery; the Napoleonic period, especially the King's German Legion; Bexhill's Old Town.

Young people of the town are vital if Bexhill's heritage is to be kept alive. To this end there is close liaison with schools, giving talks at the schools, and at Bexhill Museum. Research details and slides have been supplied to schools for use in their local history studies, a part of the National Curriculum since September 1991.

Acknowledgements

Material for this work has been gathered from several sources. The St. Peter's church guide section is based mainly on J.E.Ray's paper (see inside back cover) The stories of Ss. Wilfrid and Richard come from snippets in many books and historical research. The whole is augmented by the compiler's own research and experience of showing visitors around.

The history of the K.G.L. and Bexhill's Napoleonic links are derived mainly from research by the Bexhill Hanoverian Study Group and journals published by the Friends of the Waterloo Committee Association.

Church Guides

In summer a guide is usually at the church to point out the Saxon, Norman, early English, medieval, and Victorian periods. Group visits by arrangement.

For more information about Historic Bexhill:

The Bexhill Museum

The Wellington Room, Northern Hotel

Bexhill-on-Sea: A Pictorial History - Aylwin Guilmant

A Walk in Bexhill Old Town - F. E. Rye

Pamphlet: De La Warr Pavilion 1933-35

The Story of Bexhill by L. J. Bartley **

The Sussex Archaeological Collection vol.53 - Paper (1910)

by J.E. Ray "St. Peter's Church" **

** Can be seen at Bexhill library in Western Road

The Northern Hotel



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themselves with

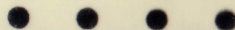


THE BEXHILL HANOVERIAN SOCIETY

in marking Bexhill's link with the Battle of Waterloo. Our own contribution is to create a Wellington Room and Bar, decorated in the style of the period, where guests for the Restaurant can relax with an aperitif and all are welcome to partake of Morning Coffee and Afternoon Tea.



Two stylish Restaurants with Table D'hôte and
A la Carte menus or just simply a snack at the
bar - small private dinner parties our
speciality.



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